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# A Narrative Conceptualization of the Imposter Phenomenon: Implications for Supervisors of Beginning Counselors



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# Problem Statement



- During practicum, internship, & the beginning years of professional counseling, counselors' internal models of 'quality therapy' are confronted with the realities of practicing for the first time, typically resulting in some degree of anxiety
- Trainees have differing abilities to understand and cope with this anxiety
- Some feel as if they have 'faked' their way to this point in development, and that their fraudulence is about to be discovered

# Session Goals



- Learn about the imposter phenomenon (IP; Clance & Imes, 1978) & characteristics of its experience among beginning counselors
- Apply various Narrative Therapy (White & Epston, 1990) concepts to supervisory practice
- Develop a narrative framework for understanding the IP & how to address it using a narrative supervisory approach

# The Imposter Phenomenon (IP)



- Clance & Imes (1978)
- General inability to internalize successes
- Describes individuals (generally high-achieving) who believe:
  - They are incompetent despite contradictory evidence
  - They are less capable than their peers
  - Their abilities are overestimated by peers
  - Others will eventually discover their incompetence

# IP Behavior & Personality Correlates



- Theorized to occur more in women, but data point to no differences in frequency of IP by gender (see Royse-Roskowski, 2010; Topping, 1983)
- IP leads some to over-prepare (Caselman, Self, & Self, 2006) & some to self-handicap (Want & Kleitman, 2006)
- Associated with:
  - Trait anxiety (Topping, 1983)
  - Depression (McGregor et al., 2008)
  - Low self-esteem (Sonnak & Towell, 2001)
  - Low self-efficacy (Royse-Roskowski, 2010)
  - High neuroticism & low conscientiousness (Bernard et al., 2002)
  - Proneness to shame (Cowman & Ferrari, 2002)

# Differentiating the IP from Low Self-Efficacy



- Royse-Roskowski (2010):
- Study of master's & doctoral trainees in various counseling & psychology training programs
- Counseling self-efficacy & the IP were negatively related; however:
  - Amount of counseling experience (*prior experience, months in program, months in practicum, direct hours*) positively related to self-efficacy *but was not related to the IP*
- Essentially, experience increases self-efficacy, but does not affect the IP

# IP & Achievement Motivation



- The Dweck model (Elliot & Dweck, 1988)
- Two basic motivations for achievement:
  1. Learning goals: motivated by desire for knowledge
    - *Respond to challenges/failures with resilience*
  2. Performance goals: motivated by desire to prove intelligence
    - *Respond to challenges/failures with helplessness/self-blame*
- Langford (1990)
  - Participants given unsolvable anagrams
  - IP strongly correlated with 'Performance goals' motivation style



# IP in Supervision of Counseling Trainees



- **Key challenges for new counselors with IP tendencies:**
- **Psychosocial impact-**
  - Prone to respond to new challenges & difficulties with feelings of helplessness
  - Prone to anxiety, shame, neuroticism, low conscientiousness
  - Imposter feelings may not diminish with experience

# IP in Supervision of Counseling Trainees



- Key challenges for new counselors with IP tendencies (continued):
- Threats to skill level-
  - May result in self-handicapping (procrastination, lack of effort, etc.)
- Threat to supervisory relationship-
  - Difficulty internalizing successes, may either rely on external praise or have difficulty accepting it productively
  - May live in fear of being 'found out' by supervisor, instructor, or clients

# Narrative Therapy (White & Epston, 1990)



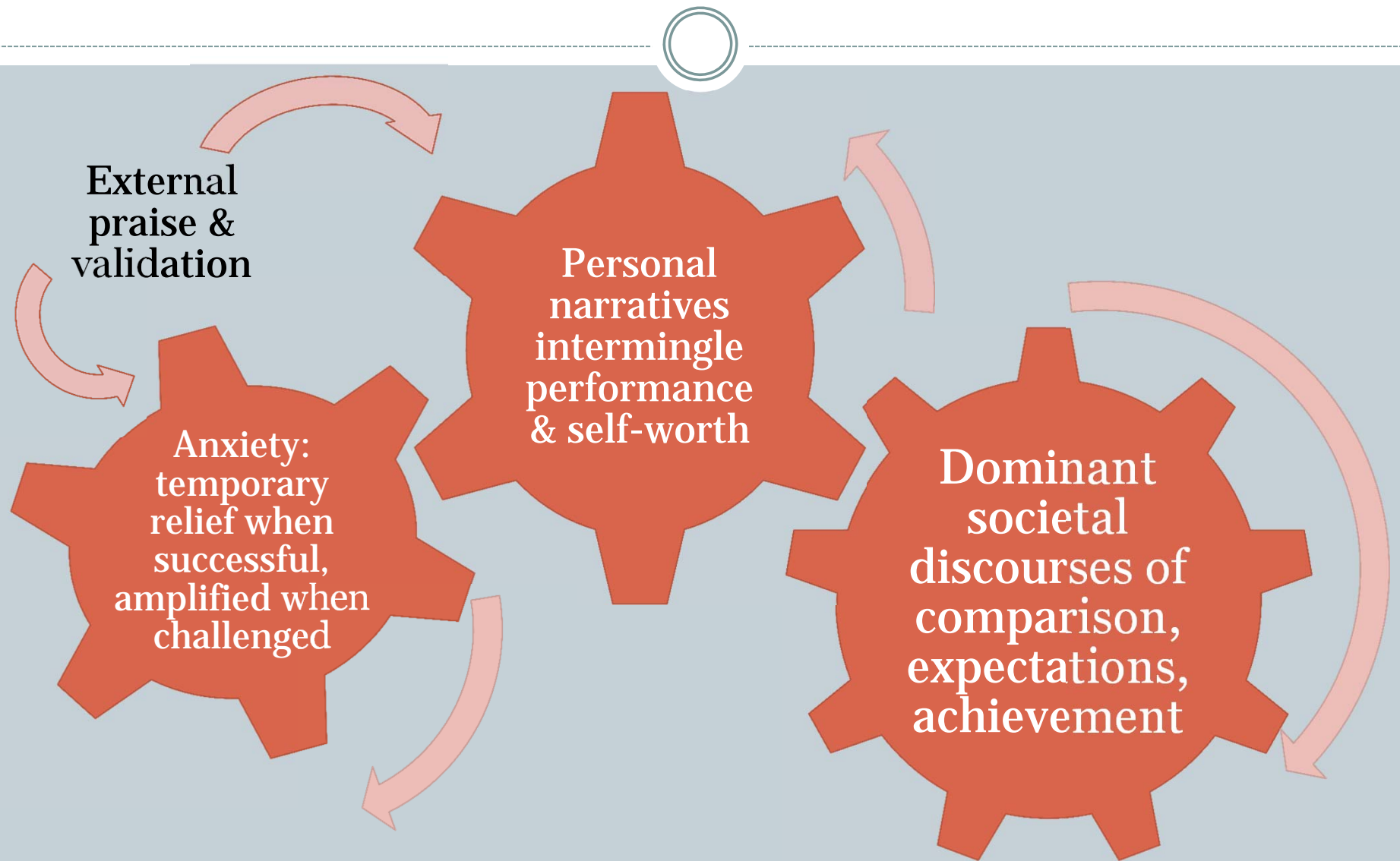
- Theory
  - Meaning developed through societal, relational, and experiential influence
  - Helps us categorize & know what to expect (e.g. 'I am a good student'), which then shapes future understanding
- Problem conceptualization
  - Problematic discourses (e.g. 'I am depressed') become dominant & *internalized*
- Therapeutic Goals
  - Externalize problem narratives
  - Awareness of larger, structural influence (discourses)
  - Choose, gather evidence for, & develop preferred narratives

# Applying Narrative Concepts to Supervision



- **Speedy (2000)**
  - Using narrative inquiry to deconstruct dominant professional narrative and develop preferred professional identity
  - Repositioning supervisee as ‘narrator’ and supervisor as ‘critical audience’
- **Carlson & Erickson (2001)**
  - The supervisory power hierarchy can potentially undermine supervisee creativity
  - Framing supervision as a time of knowledge acquisition reinforces a sense of ‘never quite measuring up’
  - Instead, supervision should be a ‘rite of passage’ by which supervisors help supervisees become aware of and utilize their own ‘special’ life knowledge

# Narrative Conceptualization of the IP



# Narrative Supervision Goals of Reducing the IP



- Deconstruct & externalize ‘performance = self-worth’ narrative
- Facilitate the awareness & development of supervisee’s unique knowledge and how to utilize it with clients
- Develop ‘thick descriptions’ of self & performance containing both strengths and developmental areas, thereby reducing reliance on external validation

# Narrative Supervision Objectives for Reducing the IP



- **Narrative inquiry to develop richer understanding of supervisee's ability**
  - “There was a lot of complexity in what your client was sharing. Tell me how you were able to put all the pieces together and come up with a response like that.”
- **Externalizing language to personify problem-saturated thinking & promote understanding that problem is separate from supervisee**
  - “Doubt and anxiety want you to think that this session was a disaster. If they weren't whispering negative thoughts in your ears right now, how do you think your evaluation of the session might be different?”
- **Normalize anxiety associated with the challenges of beginning as a counselor**
  - “You're embarking on a new journey to do something that is very important to you, and it's natural for anxiety to want to come along for the ride, too.”

# Conclusion



- Beginning counselors are at risk of imposter feelings as anxiety is high and experience & self-efficacy are low
- Supervisors are in a unique position to play a powerful role in shaping beginning counselors' understandings of their abilities
- Narrative therapy offers concepts that are useful for conceptualizing the imposter phenomenon & for deconstructing the dominant narratives linking performance & self-worth and reconstructing a preferred narrative that normalizes strengths & growing edges



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